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ABSTRACT

Poor student study habits are often rooted in the low standards which students set for themselves or in the absence of standards by which they can judge whether they have mastered a skill or subject. One technique for teaching students to apply standards to their work involves a series of steps by which students can monitor their own progress. The instructor teaches the student the correct actions to follow, how to identify and observe the results of their actions, the standards that apply to the work, the means of comparing the results to the standards, and the need to change their actions if their results do not meet the standards and to repeat the actions if standards are met. In teaching the standards, the instructor should use whatever senses (e.g., sight, hearing, touch, or feeling) are relevant; provide a checklist of traits that standard work should possess; provide negative as well as positive examples; and teach the standards appropriate for beginners as well as the ideal. Standards should also be stressed when giving assignments. Rather than telling a student to read or study a passage, the instructor should provide clear standards by which students can tell if they have mastered the materials. When students are taught to apply standards to the results of their work, they are likely to work harder and more accurately. (HB)

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HOW TO TEACH AND TO WORD ASSIGNMENTS SO THAT STUDENTS DO MORE AND BETTER WORK

by

Daniel L. Hodges

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Often students set low standards for their own work, and it causes teachers a problem. The students' unwillingness to strive for excellence means they do a poor job at learning the early skills taught in a class. Consequently, all their later work based on this shoddy foundation is also poor. Likewise, students often seem unable and unwilling to hunt for their own errors and correct them. It slows down the learning process and can drive teachers to despair.

I want to describe a technique for helping students to increase the quality of their work. Many managers in business and industry use it with their workers and themselves. It has a good reputation and considerable research support. If you use it effectively, you will see most of your students working longer on their assignments. Many of them will not quit until they reach the standards you specify for them. And, best of all, people with a good attitude to start with will actually take your standards and adopt them as their own.

You already possess the essential skill as an instructor and a professional. If you picked up a book in your field and studied it, you could accurately tell when you understood the material and when you did not understand it. If you practiced using a new tool or practiced a new skill, you would usually know when you had achieved a good level of skill. But many of our students do not have this ability to tell whether they understand new information or whether they have mastered a new skill. Because of this uncertainty, they quit their reading and practicing before they achieve mastery. You would not quit. Or if you had to stop work, you would not be fooled about your precise degree of knowledge and skill.

Now if we can describe what it is that you know about your subject (which the students don't know) which gives you your skill in identifying precisely when you've worked enough to master a topic, we've got most of the problem licked. Why? Because you could then teach this knowledge to the students. They are more likely to do adequate work by themselves and not need you to evaluate and correct their work. This is called autonomy. It's a lovely trait for students to have.

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The skill you have is this: You know what standards to apply to your work, you know how to identify the results of your work, you compare the results to the standards, and you actively strive to make the results match the standard. Because you have this skill, you usually spot imperfections and correct them. It encourages you to work hard and to work accurately. Because the students often lack this skill, they work less hard. If we could teach them this skill, most of them would work as hard and accurately as you do.

There is a deep and powerful principle of human motivation that revolves around setting standards and testing results against the standards. You can usually motivate all but openly rebellious people by carefully explaining what results they are expected to achieve and by making it very easy for them to tell when they've succeeded or not. It's practically a psychological law: "The easier it is for people to identify when their actions produce results

that match the standards, the harder they will work to achieve the standards."

The General Idea

Here is your job as a teacher: To make it easy for the students to tell whether their actions have produced results that match the standards. And the more the students can do it by themselves, without needing your feedback, the more successful you have been.

I want to summarize the ideas involved in a series of steps. You can generally succeed in your teaching if you can do the following things. Notice that I have systematically used the words "actions", "results", and "standards".

1. You teach the students the correct actions to follow.
2. You teach the students how to observe and identify the results of their actions.
3. You teach them the standards that apply to this work.
4. You teach them to compare their results to the standards.
5. (a) If they conclude that the results do NOT match the standards, teach them to change their actions until the results do match the standards.
   (b) If they conclude the results DO match the standards, teach them to remember and to repeat the actions which produce these good results.
6. You reward students who can do these steps effectively. You do not reward as greatly other students who cannot.
7. Whenever you give an assignment, you carefully define the standards to which the students are to compare the results of their actions.

Four Examples

I want to illustrate these concepts with some examples.

A student reads an Electronics text (the action) and remembers some of it (a result). But the student does not remember enough to be able to use an important formula to solve a problem on a test (the standard).

A welding student watches (an action) a teacher strike an arc for welding the correct way. (The instructor's action produces results that match the standard.) When the student tries to strike an arc (the action), he or she leaves the arc too long (the result) in comparison to the standard length it should be (the standard).

A student writes an essay for a writing class (an action). The student does not reread the essay's words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs (the results) and compare them to the principles (the standards) that the teacher has described. (The student has omitted matching the results to the standards.)

A typing student comes to the word "neighbor" and is not sure how to spell it. So the student pauses and recites: "I before E, except after C, or when sounded like A, as in neighbor and weigh. Exceptions: either, neither, weird, seize and leisure." (The standard.) Then the student types "neighbor" correctly (the result matches the standard), checks it once to make sure (the self-test), and proceeds on further (more actions).

How to Use This Method in Giving Lectures

Your job is to help students find out for themselves when their actions produce results that match the applicable standards. Therefore, you have to teach standards, results, and the matching or self-test procedure.

One type of lecture requires that a teacher explain how to do something to the students. Suppose a biologist were explaining how to dissect specimens. He or she should describe the characteristics of good incisions (the standard). what traits to look for in one's own incisions (the results), and how to compare the incision to the standard. Suppose a piano teacher explains a fingering technique. It would helpful to teach the standards for the way the phrase will sound both by verbal descriptions if possible and by playing examples. The teacher should also encourage students to use their ears to hear the volume, the rhythm, and the accuracy of the notes they produce and to compare their results to the mental auditory image of the standard. Other teachers would teach standards, results, and matching in other ways.

I want to make a few suggestions about how to teach the standards. First, the teacher should demonstrate the standard by showing, sounding, touching or using whatever senses are relevant. Let the students encounter the standard by using their senses. Let them see, hear, touch a set of perfect examples. Tell them that this is the standard. Urge them to memorize this example. If they will produce original work, still show them models of excellence. Second, the teacher should use words to describe the important characteristics of ideal examples. Make lists of the traits the students should attend to. Use the words to point to the sensory examples so that the words are linked to sensory traits that are important. For example, in teaching a good golf swing, you could demonstrate it, then use words to point out all the features of the body's dynamically changing motion. (For those readers who are aware of research into brain hemispheres and learning, notice that this technique integrates left-brain and right-brain learning.)

It is sometimes helpful to make checklists of traits that standard work should have. It aids the memory, and it makes students take the standards more seriously. After all, if airline pilots and manufacturing inspectors have checklists, there must be something good about them.

You can use two powerful phrases which get students' attention and which describe your standards. "Here is how to tell if you've got it right." AND "Here is how to tell if you did it wrong." Then you list the traits of right and wrong results

It is also very helpful to give the students some negative examples, some examples of work that does not meet standards. It is helpful both to demonstrate and to describe in words the most common mistakes. You can skillfully weave these examples into before-and-after stories of dumb students making horrible mistakes and then learning to do better. One of the most common mistakes teachers make is to present only positive examples of a concept. Why should you describe both the positive and the negative? It is because people are motivated to move towards rewards and away from punishments. If they have only learned what the ideal is, they may do their action, and

think that they are getting the ideal. But they may unconsciously drift into mistakes. If they've never been taught to look for the signs of bad work, they're slower to catch it. So I recommend teaching both positive examples and negative examples of the standards.

It is generally helpful to teach two standards: (1) the absolute ideal and (2) the beginner's standard. You know that beginners make horrible mistakes and you can tell, even through a fog of mistakes, that your students are progressing. Do your students know? Often they don't. Often they believe that their natural mistakes are a sign that they are doomed to failure, and they get very discouraged. You can prevent that discouragement by telling them the standards that are good enough for now.

Besides teaching students what the standards for good work are, you also need to teach them how to find the results they have produced by their actions. In basketball it is easy. Players and spectators see the balls drop through the hoop. But in many other tasks it is harder than it seems to identify the results. Suppose the activity is to study an Accounting textbook. A student from a poor high school may have never learned how to identify when he or she has learned certain information satisfactorily. Oddly, many students do not know when they have learned or memorized something. No one ever taught them to look at a fact, cover it up with their hand, ask the question to which the fact is the answer, try to say the fact, then uncover the page and compare their statement (the result) to the text's statement (the standard). No one ever taught them other systems of memorizing either. Consequently, they need to be taught how to detect the results of their own attempts to learn.

In teaching students to detect the results of some kinds of actions, you sometimes have to teach them which sense to use. "Keep your eye on the ball." "When you sing, use your ears to listen to the sound of your voice and the sound of the piano at the same time." "Use your hands and grasp the two pieces of metal you've bolted together and shake them, feeling for any looseness." It is often harder for students to find and observe results than most teachers remember. Because of this difficulty, it is often essential for teachers to train students directly how to observe the results of their actions. One teaches this skill just like any other skill: model it, break it into simpler components, teach under simple conditions, then gradually increase the complexity, and provide lots of practice.

After you have taught students the standards and how to find results, the students are ready to compare their results to the standards to see if they match. Although it is ideal if the students can do this by themselves, sometimes a teacher has to do this matching for the students. But eventually the goal is complete autonomy for the students.

The comparison and self-test are what self-directed, autonomous learning is all about. Once students clearly see how close or distant their results are from the standard, it strongly motivates them to correct their own work. As long as they know how to correct their own work, many students will willingly work for hours. This accounts for the fascination that art, music, computer programming and sports have for many people. The feedback is immediate and obvious. When students gradually learn how to produce results that match the

standards, they feel pleasure. They feel more pleasure if they can find the results they produced and match them to the standards themselves than if they have to wait for you, the teacher, to evaluate the work. So I return to my main point: Teach students 3 things--how to do their work right, how to find the relevant results of their actions, and what the standards are. Then teach them to compare results to standards and to modify their actions until they reliably produce good results.

How to Word Assignments

When writing assignments or when giving students some instructions, it is also important to carefully describe the standards that their work is expected to achieve. Students tend to do what we tell them to do. The more precisely we tell them how to study or to practice or to solve problems, the more likely they will achieve high standards. The more clearly the students know how to tell when they have done the assignment right, the more likely they will continue to work until it is done right. If the work is such that they cannot tell if it is good work until the teacher gives feedback, they are less likely to do good work. But if they are provided with methods for doing self-checking and for doing it easily, they are more likely to correct their own mistakes and to produce good work.

I am thinking of teachers using wording like this in their assignments: "Study Chapter 3, 'Social Norms", until you could take an objective test and recognize the correct meanings of the 15 technical terms listed below, could identify correct examples of the 3 principles listed below, and answer true-false questions on the many research findings quoted in the chapter. You will get a C if you get 70-79%, a B for 80-89%, or an A for 90% and better." (Then you would list the 15 technical terms and the 3 principles; you would not list all the research facts.)

Or if your assignment to solve a series of problems or to practice a skill task, I would recommend that you define the level of quality the students should aim for. Describe the traits that you look for which define good work. Use a checklist or teach the students a self-checking procedure. Be sure to inform the students that there is a zone of permissible variation in their work so that their fear is reduced. If they believe that one mistake sinks them, they will get easily discouraged. Also if some creative work like writing and art requires a relaxed creative phase followed by an editing phase, teach this procedure to the students. The purpose is to prevent them from becoming too inhibited because they are too conscious of the standards.

Try to avoid writing assignments this way: "Read Chapter 3, 'Social Norms'." OR "Do problems 1-15, p. 39." The danger in reading assignments is you have implied "You only need to read this material." If you say "read" or say "study" without carefully defining the standards, the students will only read. Since you have not defined the standards, the students will interpret the standards for themselves. And where will their standards come from? Where else is left? Only the depths (or shallows) of their own characters! They are prone to misinterpret you. Some will think you demand perfect memory of the reading. But that's virtually impossible. And they know it. So they'll read it through,

feeling like failures as they go, and think they're done. Or they'll underline things virtuously. Some others will think you only demand "understanding". So they'll try to understand, but they'll fail to memorize important information and fail to practice important skills.

The more clearly your assignments describe the standards that students should compare their work to, the more likely they will do the assignments up to those criteria. You do not need to fear rebellion or discouragement unless your standards are extremely high and unreasonable. If you teach students in class how to do the work and what the standards are, you do not need to write overly long assignments. People do easy things willingly. Once students find it easy to work, to find their results, and to compare their results to the applicable standards then the students are likely to work hard and achieve high standards. You will also find a benefit as your students become more autonomous learners and less dependent on you for feedback.

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